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West African Arts Coming to Newark

By BARBARA GILFORD

WHEN the International African-American Ballet crosses the Hudson River this week to dance in the streets here, the performers will bring history and culture, as well as entertainment, to an audience expected to number about 5,000.

The New York-based company of 12 dancers and 5 drummers has colorful costumes and a style of singing, dancing and drumming that they say originated in 14th-century Mali.

Working with Dancemobile, a touring project created almost 20 years ago by the Harlem Cultural Council to take professional dance to city neighborhoods, the ballet will give three free performances on the mobile stage, complete with lighting and sound systems.

Neighborhood residents will see all the elements that go into a finished performance, including the setting up of the stage and the dancers' warm-ups and exercises.

Both the sponsors of the Dancemobile tour and the dancers are committed to preserving and performing ethnic dance and music.

"African dance and tap dance are two forms of expression that have emanated from the black experience," said Philip Thomas, president of the Carter G. Woodson Foundation, one of the primary sources of funds for the performances. "They have very, very deep roots in our com-

munity, and you can trace them all the way back to the continent of Africa."

Mr. Thomas created the foundation 12 years ago to advance black history and culture through theater, dance, music and literary events. The foundation is considered an emerging

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force in the state as an advocate and sponsor of black history and culture in programs of professional caliber.

"It's extremely important we don't let these art forms die out," said Mr. Thomas, who is already looking to next year's projects, which include a performance by the tap-dancing troupe The Copaceticas.

Dancers in the International African-American Ballet have gone to West Africa to learn new dances and music and to observe cultures in which dance is not separate from, but integrated into, daily life.

The music and dances of Senegal, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Guinea and the Ivory Coast provide the artistic inspiration for the company through distinct dance forms that demand as strong and serious a discipline as do jazz or modern dance, according to Rhonda Morman, founder and director of the 10-year-old dance company.

"African dance depends heavily on music," Ms. Morman said in a recent interview. "A specific rhythm goes with a specific dance. In some instances, there's a specific instrumen-

tation that goes with a particular dance technique."

Ms. Morman includes explanations to the audience as part of the performance.

Bruce Terry of Newark, who dances with and is the administrative director of the company — and whose professional name is Mansa K. Mussa — considers himself a historian and educator as well as a dancer.

A graduate of Weequahic High School and a television major at Jersey City State College, Mr. Terry has immersed himself in West African culture. To bring authenticity to the stage, he has done extensive research on the food, clothing and daily life of West Africa.

"To me, dancing is not just an emotional thing," he said, "but also a historical document that we put on the stage every time we perform."

"Most practitioners of African dance feel that we're purveyors of history. We're taking a slice of history, not only from present-day Africa but from Africa of the past and we're bringing it here to America."

Mr. Terry describes the drum beat as the central and cohesive element in African dance.

"The drummer is the center of the world in terms of providing not only a rhythm you can dance to," he said, "but also a call to certain daily rituals."

"For black people, our heart beat is the drum. When we came from Africa that is something we understood. The feeling is still here in black people in America."

"You listen to popular music, rhythm and blues, soul and jazz and the emphasis is on the beat. That's the key that will get the audience to understand that African dance and African music are just like popular dance and popular music. It's the beat that brings it home and pulls it together."

The Dancemobile performances will take to new audiences the work of a company that has performed at Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors concerts, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Manhattan's Symphony Space and the Newark Museum.

Funds for the performances come not only from the Woodson Foundation but also from Public Service Electric and Gas Company, the Mid-Atlantic States Arts Consortium and the Newark Division of Recreation and Cultural Affairs.

Newark's Mayor, Sharpe James, considers the Dancemobile project an example of the type of programs his newly created Department of Cultural Affairs will offer in the future.

Pam Washington, a mayoral aide, said that Mr. James "wholeheartedly embraces the project and other projects of this nature in terms of cultural enlightenment and promoting the arts."

The Newark Dancemobile tour will begin Tuesday at 11:45 A.M. at P.S.E. & G. Plaza. Additional performances will be held at 8 P.M. at Girard Place and Clinton Avenue and Wednesday at 8 P.M. at 16th Avenue and South 18th Street.

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will perform in Newark. Article, page 22.

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